
A FRENCH ASYLUM ON THE SUSQUEHANNA RIVER

SOUTHWARD from New York state the lovely Susquehanna winds its meandering way through the wooded hills of Bradford County, Pennsylvania. At a point about ten miles below Towanda, between Wysox and Wyalusing, it arches eastward into a great horseshoe bend, half encircling a terrace of land that slopes gently backward into the western hills. From the highway that skirts the ridge of Rummerfield Mountain on the opposite side of the river, its 1,600 acres can be seen neatly divided into carefully tilled fields and pasture land. A fringe



Courtesy National Gallery of Art

Queen Marie Antoinette, attributed to Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun.

of trees borders the river's edge and small patches of woods stand near isolated farmhouses and on the bordering heights. A scene of undisturbed pastoral calm banded by a glistening arm of silvery water, this fertile crescent of land was *Azilum*—or Asylum.

Many, many years ago when northern Pennsylvania was Indian country this place was known as Missicum—the “Meadows.” The settlers who moved into the valley from Connecticut called it Standing Stone, after the monolithic stone shaft that rises high out of the river bed near the western bank, a landmark from time immemorial. But to a little group of exiles who stepped ashore at this remote spot in the late fall of the year 1793, it was a haven far removed from the dangers of revolution, imprisonment, slave insurrections, and yellow fever. To them it was *Azilum*—a place of refuge.

These refugees, who had come up the Susquehanna from Catawissa and Wilkes-Barre in Durham boats and dugout canoes furnished by the trader Matthias Hollenback, were citizens of France and of her West Indies colony of Santo Domingo (Haiti). Those from France had fled to Philadelphia to escape the certain imprisonment and probable death for which their loyalty to Louis XVI marked them. A few were of the courtier circle close to the king; some were of the minor nobility, officeholders, army officers, professional men, clergymen, merchants, and a few artisans. Politically, the leaders were men of liberal inclinations who had worked to reform the government of France of its worst abuses but to retain the king as a constitutional monarch. Their moderate program had recently been thrust aside by fanatical revolutionaries, who followed a policy of exterminating all who were suspected of the slightest sympathy or attachment to the hapless Bourbon rulers. Emigrés by



*Azilum, sketched by
le comte Colbert de
Maulevrier from across
the Susquehanna River
on a visit in 1794.*

Courtesy Countess Paul de
Leusse, Paris

the thousands streamed across the borders of France seeking sanctuary in other countries.

The exodus from Santo Domingo in 1793 was a flight from the carnage of the slave and mulatto uprising which followed the declaration of equality by the radical French Assembly. Plantations were laid waste, estates were burned, and whites were slain by the rebellious Negroes. Some who secured passage to the mainland arrived destitute of all material goods. About 2,000 distraught Santo Domingans landed at Philadelphia in the summer of that year. They were aided by sympathetic Philadelphians and by such leading Franco-Americans as Stephen Girard and Peter Duponceau, who organized the French Benevolent Society of Philadelphia to provide the essentials so desperately needed. In explaining the cause of the loathsome yellow fever epidemic which swept Philadelphia in the summer and fall of 1793, some suspected that the Santo Domingans had brought it with them.

An American who was close to several of the principal French exiles responsible for the founding of the colony was Pennsylvania's Senator Robert Morris, financier of the Revolution, merchant, and land speculator. Through him and his partner John Nicholson, Pennsylvania's comptroller general, a large tract of land in the northern wilderness of the State was to be purchased and transformed into a woodland Arcadia. The settlement of this region would increase the value of other lands owned by Morris. The exiles, their families, and, according to a story so far unverified, even the Queen of France herself, the ill-fated Marie Antoinette, and her two children would here at last find peace and security.

Getting the settlement started was the task of two Frenchmen, Antoine Omer Talon and Louis de Noailles. Prior to exile, Talon had been an attorney, later chief justice of the criminal court of France, and head of the royal secret service. An advisor and confidant of Louis XVI, he would have inevitably met death by the guillotine had he not escaped to England, from whence he took passage to America. De Noailles, brother-in-law of Lafayette, was no stranger to this country, for he had fought with distinction during the Revolution. As a member of the French National Assembly of 1789, he had introduced several liberal measures aimed at reducing the traditional privileges of the French aristocracy. The rise of radicals to power compelled him to abandon France, leaving all his family, including his mother, who had been chief maid of honor to Marie Antoinette. With Captain John Keating, a capable French army officer (of Irish origin) from Santo Domingo, and counseled by Morris and other eminent Philadelphians, they planned the colony at Standing Stone, soon to be more appropriately named "Azilum."

Selection of the attractive river terrace for the colony was made through Charles Bué Boulogne, a Frenchman with experience in American land transactions, who was shown a number of sites along the river. Three hundred of the 1,600 acres were laid out as a town plot, with a two-acre market square at its center, from which ran streets laid in a gridiron. A startling departure from custom was the width of the streets, the principal street from the river landing to the square being 100 feet wide and the others sixty-six feet broad. Within the town were 413 lots of

approximately a half acre each. To the west a number of larger, uncleared lots were marked off for farm plots or future development as the colony grew.

Clearing the land, getting building materials, putting up the first dwellings, and assuring a food supply were done under the direction of Talon, aided by Hollenback, Dupetit-Thouars, and an exiled army captain, De Montullé. Men were hired in Wilkes-Barre, Tioga Point, and other river communities to push the work before extreme winter weather set in. The Frenchmen themselves were, for the most part, poorly fitted for rough, manual labor; hence much of the early backbreaking toil was done by hired workers, who took advantage of their employers' ignorance of language and money values and overcharged them. By the following spring, when more of the exiles came up from Philadelphia, about thirty rough log houses had been built. In time, several small shops, a schoolhouse, a chapel, and a theater appeared around the market square. Crude though the structures were, many had chimneys, wallpaper, window glass, shutters, and porches to satisfy the desire for beauty with comfort. What few furnishings and precious household items they had brought with them from overseas became treasured

items, little extravagances that kept fresh the memory of earlier days of luxury. A visitor to Asylum in 1798 reported seeing a piano in one of the homes. Dairying and sheep raising were begun; orchards and gardens planted; a gristmill, blacksmith's shop, and a distillery were erected; and potash and pearlash manufactured to be used in making soap, gunpowder, glass, and fertilizer. Mail was carried weekly by an express rider traveling on horseback to Philadelphia.

Most imposing of the buildings in the colony was "La Grande Maison," a large two-story log house, eighty-four feet long and sixty feet wide, with numerous small-paned windows and eight large fireplaces. It has been said that this was to be a dwelling for the queen, but no written record to verify this has yet been found. Talon, who had directed construction of the house, lived in it for several years.

The Duc de la Rochefoucauld-Liancourt, a French nobleman who visited the colony for twelve days in 1795, found there such persons as the Marquis de Blacons, a former deputy, keeping a haberdasher's shop in partnership with Colin de Sevigny, erstwhile archdeacon. A cleric, Bec-de-Liévre, was now a shopkeeper, and Beaulieu, a captain of infantry, had turned innkeeper. From Santo Domingo had come Buzard, a planter and physician, bringing wife, children, and slaves. Another was Renaud, a wealthy merchant who had salvaged part of an immense fortune. Nores and Carles, clergymen, were proving to be apt farmers, and the sons of the widow d'Autremont, one a notary and the other a watchmaker, had become hewers of wood and tillers of the soil. A most colorful figure was Aristide Dupetit-Thouars, one-armed naval hero, fondly called "the Admiral," who was now cheerfully clearing several hundred acres of land given to him for his services. Deviously derived from his name is that of Dushore, a town some twenty miles distant. There were also artisans and workmen, some Americans among them.

Life at Asylum was not entirely a monotonously grim battle with the wilderness. The volatile, fun-loving French found time for picnics, for boating and sleighing parties, for dances in the pavilion on Prospect Rock, and for staging plays in their theater. "La Grande Maison" was the scene of gay assemblies and



Courtesy Girard College

Stephen Girard, by Bass Otis.



Independence National Historical Park, Philadelphia

Robert Morris, by Charles Willson Peale.

dinners in honor of notable visitors such as Talleyrand, Louis Philippe, who was later king, and his princely brothers, and Liancourt. Jewels and richly embroidered silk gowns were worn by the ladies on these festive occasions, and their male escorts were but a shade less dazzling in their satin knee breeches, colorful coats, and buckled shoes.

But Asylum was not to endure. There was latent and at times open dislike of the colonists by some Americans, aggravated by the wartime edicts of the French government that after 1795 resulted in seizure and confiscation of American ships and cargoes. The income of the colony's founders from French sources had been cut off, costs were high; titles to lands of the Asylum Company, formed as a speculation in a million acres of surrounding country, were disputed; and Morris and Nicholson went into bankruptcy for the sum of ten million dollars. Times were hard and money tight.

In the later years of the 1790's the émigrés gradually drifted away to the southern cities of Charleston, Savannah, and New Orleans, and some returned to Santo Domingo. Nostalgia set in, for the Frenchmen loved their mother country and yearned for a reuniting with kin and a return to the old familiar Gallic ways of life. Napoleon Bonaparte at last made this possible. Some families, however, the Homets, LaPortes,

LeFevres, Keatings, Brevosts, and D'Autremonts, chose to remain. In later years their descendants, in a minor diaspora, moved from Asylum and aided in the settlement and development of Wysox, Wyalusing, Athens, Towanda, and Wilkes-Barre, and communities in southern New York State.

The impress the French colony left on northern Pennsylvania is apparent in such names as Frenchtown, Asylum Township, Laporte, Homet's Ferry, Coudersport, Smethport, Roulette, Keating, and Dushore. But more important was the initiative of these exiles that spurred improved transportation, began new industries, introduced better breeding of livestock and cultivation of new crops, and brought more hard metal into use in a barter economy. For a decade Asylum was a little island of old world culture casting its civilizing influences into the rugged frontier of our northern counties.

Time has not erased all of the visible evidences of the Asylum colony, though not one of the more than fifty structures erected by the refugees has survived, and the gardens carefully laid out by them have been tilled as farm land for many generations by later residents. The spring of water that supplied "La Grande Maison" bubbles on; a millrace and millstones can be seen at Homet's; and the sharp-eyed will spot vestiges of the old road that ran over the mountain toward the Loyalsock. "Ossenpachte"—old "Standing Stone"—still stands indomitable against the wear of flood and weathering. Close to the site of "La Grande Maison" a country residence was built in 1836 by John LaPorte, son of the exile Barthélemy Laporte. Here visitors may see a colonial oven, early fireplaces, handhewn timbers, wall decorations of French origin, hand-blown glass windows glazed with white lead, and other furnishings of the period.

Thirty miles up the Susquehanna River in the Tioga Point Museum at Athens, documents, memorabilia, and family traditions have been gathered together over many years to furnish the sources for the history of Asylum. The tract itself is to be developed and interpreted for visitors by the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission.

Published by the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, Harrisburg, 1991. Fourth edition, revised. Text by Norman B. Wilkinson; edited by Dr. S. K. Stevens and Donald H. Kent.